Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy for Treatment of Complex Trauma
2013 PATH Intl. Conference
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Slide 1

Equine Facilitated Change in Complex Trauma
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Purpose

• Facilitate collaborative exchange between equine facilitated and trauma professionals

• Offer a theoretical foundation and conceptual framework on which to begin a peer-reviewed discussion of equine facilitated change in complex trauma
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**Objectives**

- Overview of complex trauma
- Overview of therapeutic approaches to trauma
- Discuss benefits
- Offer a theoretical foundation and conceptual framework of equine facilitated change in complex trauma
- Provide a brief review of research approach

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**Complex Trauma Defined**

“Children’s experiences of multiple traumatic events that occur within the caregiving system” (Cook, et al., 2003, p.5).

Complex trauma has had several labels over time:
- Disorders of Extreme Distress, Not Otherwise Specified
- Complex PTSD
- Developmental Trauma Disorder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cumulative Impact of Multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional, Physical &amp; Sexual Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration of Parent</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These experiences are chronic and begin in early childhood
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**Complex Trauma: A necessary concept**

**Current System**
- Frequent misdiagnosis
- Unnecessary multiple diagnoses
- Never diagnosed
- Focusing on the behavior rather than the underlying problems that are causing the behavior

**Complex Trauma**
- Enhanced description of clinical presentation
- Assists clinicians with effective interventions
- Impairments of complex trauma go beyond DSM-IV PTSD diagnostic criterion
- Includes disruption in capacity for self-regulation and secure attachment
- Includes potential impact on individual’s ability to self-regulate, self-organize, or draw upon relationships to regain self-integrity
- Focuses on new research & importance of neurobiological differences of complex trauma

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**Neurobiology of Complex Trauma (1)**

The brain is organized in a hierarchical fashion:
- All information first enters the lower brain
- The “survivor brain”
- Lower brain in charge of regulatory functions
- Upper brain more complex thinking, planning
- Upper and lower need to communicate

Clinical Implication: A young child growing up in a home and community with pervasive threat may create a set of associations, quite outside of awareness, for threat. Thus, many cues will trigger the fight or flight response and alter behavior, emotions, and physiology.
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The brain develops from the bottom up and inside out
The brain grows during development and becomes more organized
The stress response system originates in the lower parts of the brain to help regulate and organize higher parts of the brain

Clinical Implication: If the lower part of the brain is poorly organized and regulated, upper parts of the brain will be dysregulated. Traumatic stress will result in patterned, repetitive stress response that will negatively impact thinking and emotions

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The brain develops in a sequential fashion
Success of one phase depends on success of the previous phase

Clinical Implication: If the lower part of the brain is poorly organized and regulated, upper parts of the brain will be dysregulated. Traumatic stress will result in patterned, repetitive stress response that will negatively impact thinking and emotions
Neurons change in a use dependent fashion
Typical development requires attentive, attuned, caregiving and rich array of relational opportunities

Clinical Implication: A child exposed to neglect, chaos, and constant fear will have an increased risk for significant problems in all domains of development

The brain develops most rapidly in early life
Clinical Implication: Early childhood trauma or maltreatment has a disproportionate capacity to cause significant dysfunction
Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Domains of Impairment

- Biology
  - Sensorimotor
    - Balance
  - Affect Regulation
    - Label & Express Feelings
    - Anger turns into Aggression
  - Dissociation
    - Amnesia
    - De-realization
    - Attention Regulation
      - 2 or more States of Consciousness
- Cognition
  - Understanding Responsibility
    - Task Focus & Completion
  - Executive Functions
    - Planning
    - Time & Space Orientation
  - Self Concept
    - Guilt
    - Self-Esteem
- Attachment & Relationships
  - Trust
  - Communication

- Trauma Therapy
  - The brain can change, but some systems are easier than others.
    - The upper brain is quite open to change.
    - The lower brain is not as easy to change.
  - Trauma related symptoms are related to lower brain function. These areas less open to change.
  - Traditional therapy does not target them directly.
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Therapy or Adjunct
Lower and Limbic Benefits

- Experiential
- Novel
- Sensory
- Emotional
- Social/Relational
- Cognitive
- Variable Contexts
- Variable Applications

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The Value of Theory
A framework

- Explains how & why change occurs
- Predicts what change will occur
- Offers common ground for discussion
- Offers the rhyme and reason for innovative, goal-directed, evidence based practice.
- Contributes to the development of standards for application, evaluation, research and innovation.
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**Equine Facilitated Change in Complex Trauma**

- Social animals
- Prey animals
- Primal Symbiotic Potential
- Safety
- Influence
- Attunement
- Trust
- Relationship
- Experience
- Sequence
- Pattern
- Repetition
- Change

Intrapersonal skills
Interpersonal skills

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**Primal symbiotic potential of horses & complex trauma survivors**

- Safety in group
- Comfort through affiliation
- Learning through exploration
- Perception of safety
- Repetition stabilizes change

Harm avoidance & survival
Hyperarousal
Direct threat & response
Appraisal
Rapid whole body hypervigilance
Implicit learning of survival patterns & response
Set to automatic

Relationships & survival
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Horse-Survivor Relationship
- Expectations
- Education
- Preparation
- Awareness
- Predictability

- Power
- Clear Intent
- Organization
- Control
- Management
- Responsibility

- Awareness
- Reflection
- Fidelity
- Consistency
- Reliability
- Responsiveness

- Authenticity
- Transparency
- Loyalty
- Affiliation

- Safety
- Influence
- Amusement
- Trust

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Social Learning
- Movement
- Sensory
- Emotional
- Relational
- Exploration

- Experience
- Sequence
- Pattern

- Follow sequence of natural development
- Structure consistency of sessions & coaching

- Mastery of skills
- Strengthening new learning
- Variety of application
- Variety of contexts
- Repetition
Shared instincts of social prey animals disrupt automated defense behaviors of complex trauma survivors and offer powerful motivation for learning. The survivor-horse relationship provides a developmental context for social learning experiences that lead to changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

How can you use this theory?

- Use it to improve your practice or use your practical experience to improve this theory
- Use it to set goals, design new activities and develop new programs
- Use it to measure the outcomes of your students/clients, monitor progress, refine programming & build evidence of success
- Use it to begin participation in a peer reviewed discussion and contribute to the knowledge base
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In Conclusion

- Complex trauma alters neurobiology
- Altered neurobiology poses therapeutic obstacles
- As a therapy or adjunct, the horse-survivor relationship can overcome therapeutic obstacles and enhance traditional trauma therapy
- A published theoretical foundation and conceptual framework fosters collaboration, enhances application, evaluation and research. Discussion contributes to the knowledge base and supports information exchange between disciplines
- The most useful theories are continually refined by those who use them—Use it and help us refine it 😊

Questions or Comments?

- What do you think?
- How would you change this theory?
- Watch for our study based on this theory!
- Let us know if and how the theory serves you!

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